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ABSTRACT

At one time the major problems faced by an evaluator involved the best way to collect, analyze, and report data. Today, an evaluator's major problems concern responses to the evaluation report by school superintendents, principals, teachers, unions, and parents' groups. An unwillingness to publicize the evaluation results; the failure to consider evaluation results when making program decisions; the suppression of evaluation data if it adversely affects patronage possibilities; the demand for gross over-simplification in reporting evaluation results; an inability or reticence to create new programs, or to alter old ones based upon evaluative data; and the lack of communication between evaluators and field personnel are discussed as problems resulting from the political forces which influence evaluation. The role of laymen, supervisory personnel, project managers, classroom teachers, unions, the media, and parents in the politics of evaluation is outlined. Politically motivated critics of evaluation ignore the mandated necessity of assessment, and sometimes expect that evaluation agencies will be able to provide immediate data upon request. The author maintains that these political factors result in a lack of funding and facilities necessary in the work of a competent evaluator. (JAC)

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THE POLITICS OF EVALUATION

by

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There was a time when the major problems faced by an evaluator had to do with the best way to collect, analyze and report the data. This is no longer true; the major problems today concern responses to the evaluation report by school superintendents, principals, teachers, unions and parent groups. The evaluation report has become politicized and has become the source of problems which must be faced by evaluators as they attempt to protect their findings from special interest groups. For example, there is often an unwillingness to publicize results which, though truly illustrative of the situation, might have negative political repercussions. It might be found, for instance, that ability grouping produces maximum growth in

academic achievement. If, however, ability grouping would result in racially segregated classrooms, then such findings would, in many localities, be considered political anathema. The result of all this, of course, is that politics are served, rather than children -- and the public cannot understand why the quality of education continues to deteriorate while the cost of education continues to rise.

For a variety of reasons, evaluation results are often not considered in making program or management decisions: The results may be considered politically inexpedient; the results are available too late for incorporation in the recycling design; the person in a key management position simply does not agree, philosophically, with the results. Whatever the cause, the net result is the same: The evaluation might just as well never have been conducted. This situation gives rise to a concomitant problem in that the morale of evaluation workers suffers when they become aware that their work may be in vain. As in most such situations, reduced morale results in reduced quality of output.

Evaluation data may purposely be ignored if it adversely affects patronage possibilities (e.g. teacher aides). Education and evaluation, as they become more and more a function of community involvement, become more and more susceptible to the possibility of patronage. Where the clubhouse has built a cozy network based on nepotism and favoritism it is obvious

that any evaluation results which are considered threatening will be treated as non-existent.

Laymen -- particularly on Boards of Education -- demand gross over-simplification in reports of evaluation studies. That the difference is significant at the .05 level is not enough for them. What does it mean? That the result could have been obtained by chance alone in only five out of a hundred samples. Yes, but what does that mean? And so the report travels back and forth, back and forth, the evaluator trying to stress the limitations of his study, the lay user trying to make the findings universally applicable to satisfy his own purposes.

The inability or reticence to create new programs, or alter old ones, based upon evaluative data is a common problem caused by anything from sheer inertia to rank demagoguery. Change is always difficult; it upsets established routines; it calls for new organizations. It is awkward; so let's not have any. On the other hand, the deal has already been consummated -- let's not allow evaluation findings to interfere.

There exist no effective channels of communication between evaluators and field personnel and, as a consequence, research findings are seldom implemented. Even if nothing but good will existed between evaluators and school people the political reality of information dissemination militates

against the imparting and use of meaningful findings. This situation exists, largely, because organizational structures are such that the units which collect the data and write the reports are not the units which print and distribute them.

Frequently there is resistance to evaluation findings by supervisory personnel -- including school principals -- who "know in their bones" that the way they are doing it is the best way it can be done. This situation leads them to say such things as, "I know your findings prove my reading program is not working, but I just feel the children are getting something out of it and I am going to stick with it." Without faulting intuitive judgment completely, since there is a place for it in the educational process, it must be tempered by a realistic appraisal of the data.

Classroom teachers frequently oppose the collection of data because they are unable to see any profit to their own students. This is almost always the case with control groups from whom vast amounts of data must be taken without any program to compensate them for their time. In large degree their reluctance is well-founded since the period between data collection and report dissemination usually runs a year or more and the students who contribute the data are no longer with the teacher. While future benefits may accrue, it is difficult for the teacher to defend such practice to

the students or their parents.

Project managers are threatened by evaluation since, if the evaluation is negative, they might be out of a job. Such a consideration causes all sorts of things to happen: data disappear, project personnel are unavailable for interview, students to be observed have suddenly gone on a class trip, the evaluator is incompetent, the evaluator is biased, and so forth, and so forth. While it is not absolutely impossible to evaluate a program without the project manager's approval, it is extremely difficult.

Personnel responsible for securing federal and state monies feel threatened by evaluation results since negative results could cause the programs not to be refunded. This fear is similar to that of the project managers except for the political consideration which motivates the fear although, in the final analysis, both fear the loss of their jobs if evaluation results are negative.

School people are, increasingly, demanding that if evaluators are going to collect the data, they also provide a prescription for upgrading the program. This, of course, is a throw-back to the ages old question: "Is it the function of the evaluator simply to collect and analyze the data, or must he also assume responsibility for disseminating the findings?" Traditionally evaluators have included in their

reports a section entitled "Recommendations for Further Study." More recently, they have begun to include recommendations for improving program effectiveness -- but these have been based upon recommendations of supervisors, teachers, students and parent advisory boards. Should the evaluator make recommendations based upon his own observation? This is a serious question, deserving serious consideration. Let us assume, for example, that an evaluator is fully equipped, both in training and in experience, to evaluate any educational program. It does not follow that he is qualified to prescribe program modification. He may know nothing at all about the subject matter of the program -- hard of hearing pupils, for example, or children with cardiac limitations. While this in no way diminishes his ability to evaluate the program, it proscribes his medicating the program.

The appointment of educational evaluators based upon political consideration rather than training and experience leads to subjective evaluation reports. It must follow, as the night, the day, that when an evaluator is politically appointed he will be politically motivated. He will be grinding the axe of the people who hired him. Findings fly in the face of local school board philosophy? Chuck the study. Or, worse yet, fudge the data. Has it been known to happen? Probably. This may be the greatest single argu-

ment for the employment of evaluators through Civil Service procedures; evaluators so hired are subject to political pressure by no one, owe their job to no one and, except for incompetency, can be fired by no one. Under such circumstances, the probability of objective data collection and reporting is greatly increased.

The criticism -- politically motivated and not borne out by the facts -- that evaluation is an unnecessary frill which eats up money that would be better spent for instructional purposes chooses to ignore the fact that evaluation of funded programs is mandated by the source of funding, and that the cost of evaluation amounts to less than one-half of one percent of the program budget. These politically motivated criticisms also choose to ignore the fact that education spends less money on research and evaluation than any other agency -- public or private -- of equal size and responsibility.

The expectation that research bureaus will always be able to provide "Emergency Information" to bail out the requester has turned educational research and evaluation into a kind of political football. The truth is -- and everyone at all sophisticated in the field knows it -- that data, in vacuo, can be provided to substantiate all positions -- including those that are diametrically opposed. Is ability grouping best?

Data are available to prove that it is. Is heterogeneous grouping best? Data are available to prove that it is. The sad part of this situation is that the agency requesting the data does not want the truth; but, rather, reinforcement of its own position. This situation gives rise to a moral issue: Must the Director of a Research Bureau insist that all data be presented in order to insure a complete understanding of the issue, or is the Research Director justified in presenting only those data which have been requested and which will insure a distorted presentation to the public?

One of the more irritating political realities for evaluators has to do with availability of data processing facilities. It has been said that one cannot please both God and Mammon; no one knows this better than the Director of Computer Services in a school system and, when his choice is between analyzing the budget and analyzing the reading test scores -- he'll analyze the budget every time. This would be well and good were it not that the same people who are screaming for the budget analysis are also screaming for the reading test analysis. As a result, the evaluator is caught in a vise.

Still another vise for the unwary is the one that says "Good news won't sell papers." This pithy aphorism probably accounts for the media's propensity to simplify or alter research and evaluation data. No matter how much the scores

might have gone up within the city, there's always one school where they went down. Let's run that headline, Charlie. If the school happens to be in a depressed, inner city area, so much the better; let's see if we can't stir up a little action around here. If you think this is all sour grapes, try to remember back to the last time the newspapers or television said something good about the schools. Yet the schools are doing good things every day. More students are graduating high school than ever before. That's not what you hear about. What you hear about is declining SAT scores. What is needed is a balanced presentation; nothing is either all good or all bad. But the media has its own political functions to fulfill and, as a consequence, the public hears only the bad news.

There is frequently a tremendous disparity between the amount of evaluation data required and the amount of funding provided for the conduct of evaluation. This happens most often where a figure such as one-half of one percent is determined to be appropriate for the evaluation of each individual program. Where the program costs run to several hundred thousand dollars or more, this base rate is totally meaningful and applicable. Where the cost of a program runs to figures like thirty thousand dollars, the evaluation agency is being requested to perform its function for about one hundred fifty dollars -- which is absurd on the face of it. While it is

often the case that programs may be placed together under an "umbrella" and the evaluation funds shifted from larger appropriations to smaller, this is not always the case; yet funding sources do not seem to understand this -- they want the same kind of report for one hundred fifty dollars as they get for ten thousand dollars.

The foregoing problems are indicative of the relationships which exist between evaluators and consumers. Perhaps the most remarkable phenomenon to be observed in considering these problems is that, for the most part, they grow out of political rather than educational concerns. There may be little to be done to alleviate this situation -- empire building being as universally accepted as it is -- but the least we can do as researchers and evaluators is to recognize the nature of the beast with which we are wrestling. By so doing we may conserve our energies in order to fight only those battles which hold out some hope for victory.